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Gaunt Polyglot Cabdriver

Geoffrey Arthur Prime

Special to The New York Times

LONDON, July 20 — On the surface, Geoffrey Arthur Prime, the 44-year-old Briton charged with espionage, is a stark contrast to the other spies in this country since World War II.

Rather than attending Cambridge University, as did Sir Anthony Blunt, H. A. R. Philby, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess, Britain's best-known spies,

Mr. Prime went to a small technical college in England's china-producing district, the Potteries, in Staffordshire.

Instead of serving in prominent public positions, like Sir Anthony, who was curator of the art collection of Queen Elizabeth II, or Kim Philby, who was once spoken of as a possible head of Britain's secret intelligence service, Mr. Prime has most recently been unemployed. Before that, he was a wine salesman and a taxi driver.

A gaunt-faced man described as a hard worker and good friend by a former colleague, Mr. Prime was charged at Hereford magistrate's court last Thursday with unspecified acts of espionage in the period from Jan. 1, 1968 to Dec. 31, 1981.

During the first nine years of that interval, he was employed at the General Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham. This is the nerve center of Britain's intelligence network, and it works closely with the United States National Security Agency.

He Worked Crossword Puzzles

Mr. Prime has been charged under Section 1 of the Official Secrets Act with communicating information calculated or intended to be useful to an enemy for purposes prejudicial to the safety and interests of the state. That section was used in all Britain's major spy cases.

"There's no doubt he is highly intelligent," said Glynn Priday, chairman of the Cheltenham-based taxi company, A2B Private Hire Ltd., where Mr. Prime worked for 18 months before leaving amicably last October. "Anyone who can do the Times or the Daily Telegraph crossword puzzles in 40 minutes must be."

The suspect, who is reported to have been a high-grade linguist for the Government's communications headquarters, was fluent in Russian and also knew German, according to Mr. Priday.

"He was very interested in Russian culture and was always reading Russian newspapers and books and going to Russian plays and films," Mr. Priday said.

According to his former employer, Mr. Prime said he was trained by the Royal Air Force at the Leachurst College of Languages. Today, a spokesman for the air force said he could not identify any such institution.

Mr. Priday was not surprised that his former employee had worked for British intelligence. "Taxi drivers

come in all kinds," he said. "Geoff led us to believe that the strain and stress of working for the Government for the sort of money he was making there was just too much. He told us he and his wife wanted an easier life so he left the Government."

Mr. Prime went to work locally at the taxi company, Cheltax, where today no one would comment on him. He moved to A2B Private Hire seeking more flexible hours, but when his freelance schedule there was threatened by changes in company policy, he got a job selling wine to restaurants and hotels around Bristol, near Wales, for the German wine company, Pieroth Ltd.

Mr. Prime was born in the village of Alton, near Stoke-on-Trent, not long before World War II. The youngest of three sons of a nurseryman, he went to a local Roman Catholic village school before going on at the age of 14 to study in Staffordshire. While in his 20's he is reported to have joined the Royal Air Force.

Divorced once, Mr. Prime then married a woman with three young sons. His wife, Rhona, the boys, and his parents are said to have been in hiding for some days.

Mr. Priday described Mr. Prime's interests as soccer and reading. He said that since he was arrested on June 28 on three charges of indecent assault, Mr. Prime had lost considerable weight.

Mr. Prime is being held at the Gloucester Road prison in Hereford until his next court appearance, set for November, which will probably be at London's Central Criminal Court, the Old Bailey.

"He was a bit of a loner and didn't have much of a sense of humor, but he certainly got on well with his colleagues here," Mr. Priday said.